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VR Changes the Game for Soft Skills Training

Companies turn to virtual reality simulations for more realistic and personalized learning



The pressure is on. In this new era of work, soft skills are more critical than ever.



This year, talent developers are laser focused on building soft skills—interpersonal skills that are foundational to every employee's success, regardless of their functional role or how the technology landscape evolves.”

4th Annual 2020 Workplace Learning Report,
LinkedIn Learning

Companies and employees are still reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Safety concerns. Market disruptions. Layoffs and furloughs. Uncertainty. The stakes are high.

Our workplaces and how we work have forever changed:

- Google, Nationwide, Salesforce, Scotiabank, and others have pushed out their return to the office until late 2021.
- Some, such as Facebook and Zillow, have told employees they can work from home for good.

At the same time, racial injustice, gender inequity, and economic inequality are at the forefront of national discussion. In a volatile and polarized world, research shows that people want to connect with each other but find it more challenging than ever.

In this environment, employees need more emotional support and coaching from their managers. Sales and customer service teams need to strengthen relationships to hold on to their customers and win new ones. To meet these rising demands, professionals need to strengthen an array of soft skills—from communication to emotional intelligence.

Compared with 2019, LinkedIn's list of skills companies need most in 2020 signals even more demand for talent with strong people-oriented skills.

Our Study: What is the Best Way to Develop Soft Skills Now?

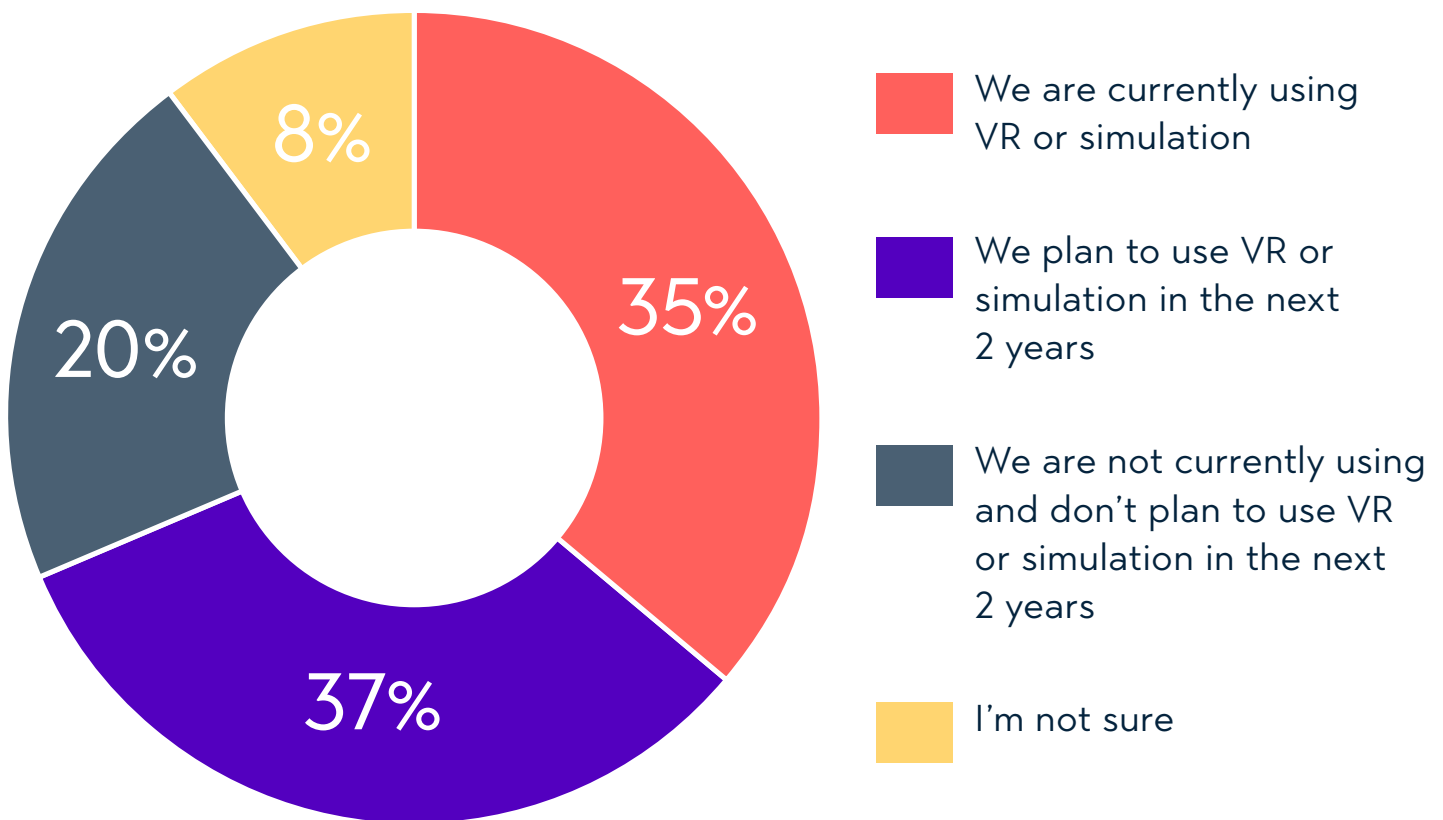
Mursion and Future Workplace surveyed more than 300 learning and development leaders to discover which soft skills organizations value most in today's markedly more remote working environment. We also set out to understand how organizations currently develop these skills and what they believe will work best for soft skills training—especially now that in-person learning opportunities have all but disappeared.

Our findings revealed that personalized, immersive virtual reality (VR) simulations are moving out in front when it comes to closing soft skills gaps. They are especially beneficial in business-critical areas such as team management and collaboration; sales and customer service; and diversity, equity, and inclusion.



VR for Soft Skills: The Wave Is Rising

By 2022, more than 72% of our respondents will have tried VR for soft skills—35% are using VR today, plus 37% more plan to use VR within two years.



The working world after the pandemic will be different. As companies emerge from the shadow of the crisis, they will have a golden opportunity to reimagine every single aspect of how they learn.

Reimagining the Post Pandemic Organization, McKinsey, May 2020

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The Hard Truth About Soft Skills

Soft skills are rare and valuable. They are challenging because...

7 out of 10

say they are difficult to develop in a safe way that minimizes risk

73% think they require years of real-life experience to develop

More than 1/2

believe few people are born with these skills and many have learned bad habits

VR fits where learning teams are heading...

8 in 10

see role playing real-world situations as the top training approach for soft skills

VR creates a wholesale shift in time to mastery—

months to weeks, weeks to hours

Given more budget, VR ranks in the top 3 “wish list” investments for **51%**

Cracking the Code on Soft Skills Training with VR

Far from straightforward, developing soft skills requires a nuanced approach. Learning needs to allow for variation in how these skills come into play—not just for different job roles and industries, but for the varied situations people will encounter. Learners need opportunities to practice different approaches in various contexts.

“Our customers tell us that the COVID pandemic has heightened the pressure on employers to onboard, train, and provide feedback to employees using virtual collaboration platforms,” Mursion CEO Mark Atkinson says. “This challenge of working remotely

comes as society is rightly demanding equitable treatment of all employees without regard to race, religion, gender, age, or ethnicity. Never has there been so much pressure on managers to possess the “human” skills needed to drive employee engagement and business performance.”

Companies are searching for ways to accelerate the process of building these skills in an efficient and measurable way. Many are turning to VR simulations for soft skills training. Here are two stories that illustrate the positive impact of this approach.



H&R Block Uses VR Simulations for Call Center Agent Onboarding and Customer Service Training

CHALLENGE

H&R Block is an 80,000 employee tax services provider that prepares 23 million tax returns annually. Every year H&R Block onboards 5,000 new call center representatives, with 1,600 of those joining in the second half of the tax season. Reliance on inexperienced frontline employees made it challenging to deliver a consistent, empathic, and high-quality customer experience. Research indicated that costs and revenue loss associated with customer retention and satisfaction may be significant: 33% of U.S. consumers consider switching service providers because of a single instance of poor customer service. Further, underperformance of late-season hires was driving up costs associated with increased handling times, hold times, and talk times.

H&R Block set out to prepare late-season hires to be customer-ready on day one. They needed to equip these call center representatives to handle calls efficiently, deliver a consistent and satisfying customer experience, and resolve issues.



Fundamentally, our employees were doing all of the things we wanted them to do...but there was something really missing in our customer interactions. There wasn't enough of a human connection, so we made the focus [of our training] on empathy."

— Kim Iorns, Director, Learning and Development

SOLUTION

The company launched a series of three custom workshops and personalized onboarding simulations for late-season hires, working in parallel to H&R Block's regular facilitators and classroom instructors. The VR simulations were designed to strengthen call center agents' on-the-job confidence, empathy towards clients, and core competencies around issue resolution.

IMPACT

- ✓ Saved 4119 hours of "average handling time," an important industry KPI
- ✓ Cut "hold time" by 55.8 seconds and "talk time" by 17.31 seconds
- ✓ Improved issue resolution by 3%
- ✓ Increased employee confidence and customer satisfaction scores

H&R Block's data on the performance of their call centers demonstrated that just two sessions led to an improvement in performance equivalent to 3 months of on the job learning.

T-Mobile Uses VR Simulations to Prepare for Change

CHALLENGE

As T-Mobile was preparing to merge with Sprint, T-Mobile wanted to build their leaders “self efficacy” at handling change management conversations in preparation for the merging of two large distinct organizations. T-Mobile’s long standing leadership program focuses on quick bursts of microlearning paired with experiential learning, ideal for upcoming leaders transitioning into a director role. The goal was to help leaders practice how to manage changing business conditions—both voicing their own concerns and countering objections expressed by resistant team members.



SOLUTION

Cohorts of leaders were run through simulations of change management scenarios. Learners were challenged to gain buy-in from an employee who is influential but resistant to change.

They accessed a digital custom environment to complete scenarios in 30-minute increments at times that were convenient to them from anywhere.

IMPACT

- ✓ Nearly 90% of employees showed competency in handling change management scenarios.
- ✓ T-Mobile has expanded the scope of training dramatically, including a simulation for learners to practice executive presentation skills.
- ✓ Use of simulations has expanded to include top talent leadership development programs, B2B sales onboarding, and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

Learners participate in authentic high-stakes conversations like they would encounter on the job.

Why VR for Soft Skills?

Today, advances in both technology and the science of learning have combined to create an innovative approach to VR simulation—one that delivers authentic scenarios that trigger a real response in the learner.

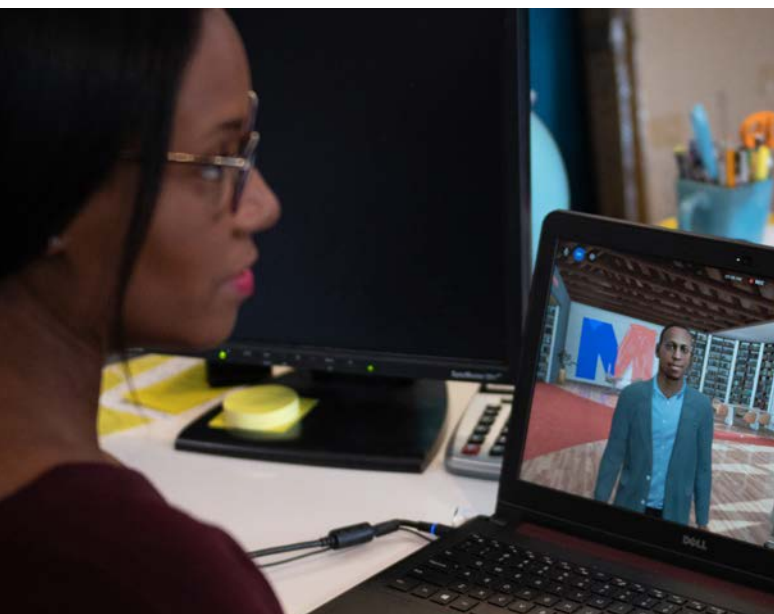
“Keeping people fully engaged in learning is even more challenging now, just as the demand for soft skills is increasing,” says Christina Yu, Vice President, Marketing, for Mursion. “We see organizations rethinking how they develop these critical skills. Whether it’s cultivating inclusion or handling difficult conversations, soft skills are complex and varied and require authentic practice that elevates the human element while driving true behavioral change.”

HUMAN EXPERIENCES THAT FEEL LIKE THE REAL THING

Immersive VR and simulations more accurately represent real-world situations. Through realistic practice, learners can more readily demonstrate desired behaviors when it counts. What’s more, these behaviors become second nature more quickly, upleveling the workforce and giving organizations an edge on the competition.

Personalizing soft skills training for different roles and contexts helps make it more applicable and valuable to the learner. More than half of those surveyed called out lack of personalization as a drawback of most current soft skills training. Learning professionals also emphasize the importance of connecting training to work, with nearly 6 in 10 (59%) saying that finding ways to bring learning closer to work is a top barrier to creating the learning organization they want in the future.

Weak soft skills are especially visible in key customer-facing functions, such as sales and customer service. The struggles our survey respondents said that frontline workers experience—difficult clients, a lack of confidence, and knowing what to do but being unable to do it in the moment—can all be addressed with opportunities to practice.



SALES TEAMS

- 36% struggle with difficult clients
- 32% know what to do but don’t get to practice

CUSTOMER SERVICE TEAMS

- Nearly half (49%) struggle with difficult clients
- More than a third (38%) struggle with confidence

VR DELIVERS IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

When asked what they consider to be the most effective form of soft skills training, the survey revealed a divide.

Experiential and interactive approaches were rated considerably higher than traditional methods. For example, 82% said role-playing real-world situations was “extremely effective” or “effective,” while only 50% said the same about reading a book or paper.

Which Training Approaches Win for Soft Skills?

IMMERSIVE/REAL-WORLD METHODS SCORED HIGH

82% 
Role-playing
real-world
situations

76% 
Coaching

70% 
Live virtual
coaching

OTHER METHODS RATED LOWER

 **56%**
Self-paced
online learning

 **54%**
Watching videos

 **50%**
Reading a book
or paper

A 2020 PWC study found that learners trained in VR are 257% more confident to deploy what they've learned in training than those learning online or in classrooms. One factor is the opportunity to practice many different scenarios.

VR simulations can be different every time—the learner can't predict what's coming next. Since the examples can't be memorized, the learner is completely immersed in the experience and needs to stay fully engaged to grasp the content.

VR Helps Companies Move Into the Fast Lane

More than just satisfying people's demands for personalized training, immersive VR and simulations can help organizations gain an edge on impact.

We asked how long it takes for early-career employees to master a soft skill—such as delivering a complex presentation to a challenging audience—using VR or using other types of soft skills training.

Across the board, respondents said VR develops soft skills faster, in weeks vs. months or days vs. weeks. Looking across the data, it's clear that bringing VR into the training mix accelerates time to impact.

Imagine what it would mean for your business if your team was able to achieve mastery in two months instead of two years!



Human Skills Are Game Changers for Companies and Their People

When we asked about the most critical soft skills for the next 12 months, these key findings emerged.

For early career employees, these skills were identified as most important to the business:

- Achieving a quality demonstration of product or service knowledge

60%

- Building listening skills

56%

- Giving constructive feedback to an underperforming colleague

55%

- Delivering a complex presentation to a challenging audience

53%

- Handling a customer complaint

43%



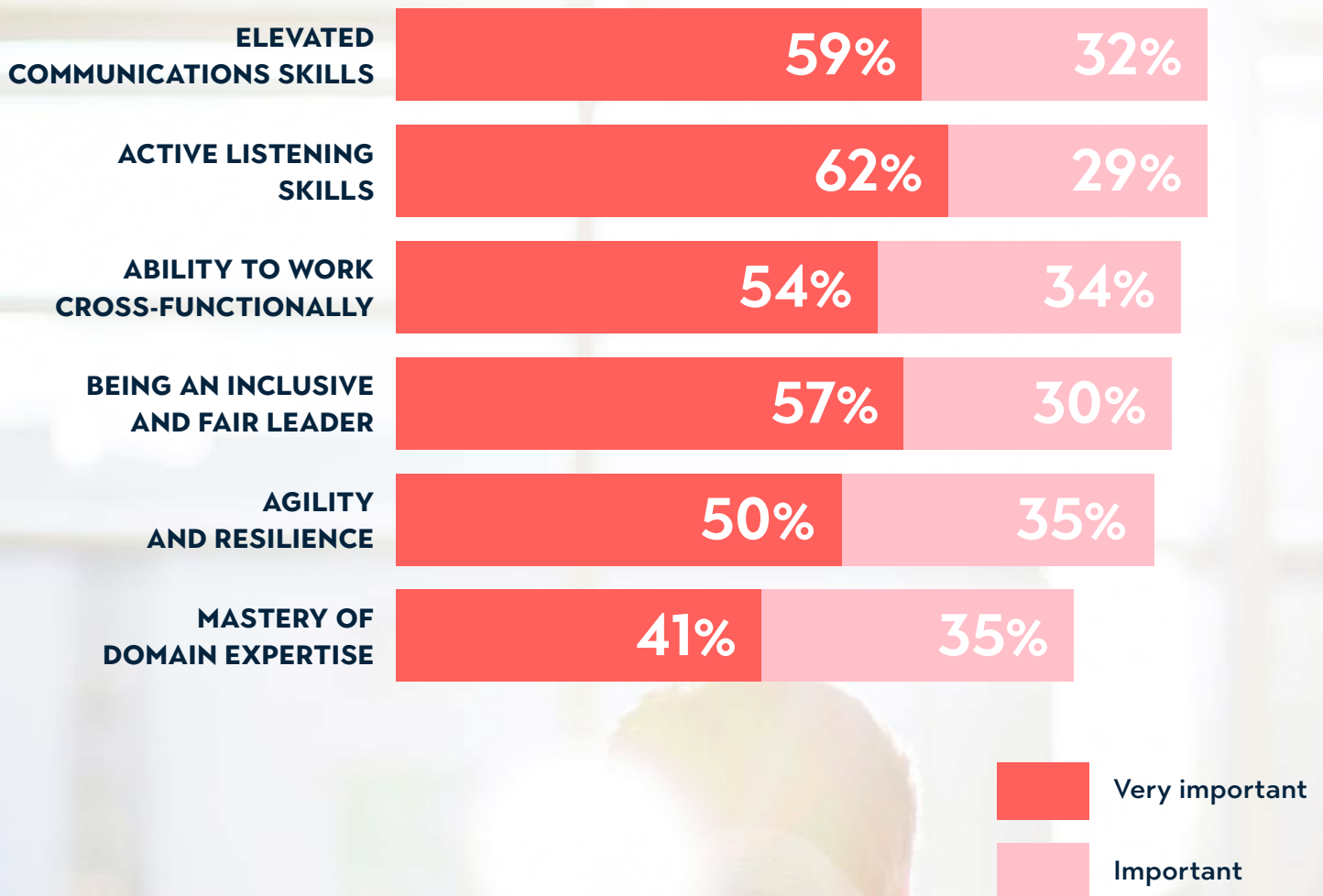
Soft skills are typically more difficult to measure but they can also help a person thrive in a variety of roles and industries.”

The Most In-Demand Hard and Soft Skills of 2020, LinkedIn



For modern learning leaders, respondents rated traits such as active listening, the ability to work cross-functionally, elevated communication skills, and being an inclusive

and fair leader as most important. These skills are especially critical now while managers are leading their teams remotely.



Soft Skills and Diversity and Inclusion

Through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion, soft skills are at the heart of fostering a culture of belonging. And yet only 40% of survey participants said that they had an adequate D&I program. Nearly 50% said there was room for improvement.

Racial injustice, gender inequity, and the polarization of society are at the fore-front of the national discussion, creating a renewed sense of urgency across organizations to create more inclusive environments for all employees.

Nearly half of those surveyed say there is room for improvement in their diversity and inclusion programs.

Hold your leading edge in the virtual workplace

Learning leaders are transforming the learning function to prepare both their teams and the wider organization. Those who embrace new technologies like VR and simulations will be well positioned to deliver the best-in-class training employees expect and organizations need, with speed and at scale.

VR fits with where learning teams are heading.

When we asked what words come to mind for the future of learning, two of the most often selected words were engaging (55%) and personalized (49%).

Jobs of the Future: Virtual Reality As Strategic Capability

In the *Harvard Business Review* article “[21 HR Jobs of the Future](#),” one of the key new HR jobs of the future is anticipated to be **VR immersion counselor**.

“We see VR immersion counselors being able to assist HR departments design, facilitate, personalize and massively scale the rollout of best-in-class workforce training and collaboration in virtual reality.”

—Jeanne Meister, co-author, *21 HR Jobs of the Future*, HBR and Managing Partner, Future Workplace

VR is gaining momentum as a mainstream learning approach. When asked, “If you could double your current learning budget, which training approaches would you allocate additional funding to?” More than half (51%) of respondents put virtual reality in their top three – higher than social learning, micro-learning or gamification, and in-person learning and artificial intelligence. Only virtual online learning ranked higher than virtual reality.

Where Learning Would Invest: Top 3



Advantages of VR Simulations for Soft Skills

1. Creates immersive training experiences that scale

While more traditional methods of training provide opportunities for consistent messaging by ensuring that all employees follow the same curriculum, corporations often struggle to deliver rigorous, effective interpersonal skills training at scale. With virtual simulations, learning and development professionals can ensure a standardized approach across their organization.

2. Realism and relevance is critical for effectiveness

When your team's training needs to be specific and authentic to the job, one size does not fit all. A virtual reality training platform drops learners into an environment that mimics their actual work settings—complete with lifelike avatars that drive authentic interactions.

3. Learners practice with diverse situations and personalities

Companies that embrace diversity and inclusion outperform their peers in multiple aspects of business performance. Virtual reality simulations offer a holistic approach for operationalizing diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. They prepare learners for the demanding interpersonal scenarios at work that require judgment, empathy, and authenticity.

4. Offers safe and anonymous practice for high-stakes roles

From front-line call center agents to sales professionals dealing with challenging clients to multi-tasking managers, safe and anonymous practice of these interactions is paramount for good business outcomes. VR simulations prepare professionals to face challenging situations with the knowledge of what to do, plus experience gained from practice.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research findings are based on a survey conducted by Savanta on behalf of Future Workplace, concluding in August 2020. In total, 305 completed the survey. The survey was administered online using both a panel and client sample. The survey targeted learning professionals in organizations with 1000 or more learning professionals that play key roles or are responsible at their organizations. Respondents were asked general questions on perceptions of VR simulation and its applicability for soft skills training in areas like leadership, HR, sales, and customer service.



ABOUT MURSION

Powered by a blend of artificial intelligence and live human interaction, Mursion provides immersive VR training for essential skills in the workplace. Mursion simulations are designed for the modern workforce, staging interactions between learners and avatars to achieve the realism needed for measurable, high-impact results. Drawing upon research in learning science and psychology, Mursion harnesses the best in technology and human interaction to deliver outcomes for both learners and organizations.

www.mursion.com



About Future Workplace

Future Workplace® prepares you and your team for the future of work. We are an HR advisory and membership firm preparing HR leaders and their teams to drive business impact, expand their skills, and adapt to the trends that matter most in the future of work. We do this by providing HR peer networks, online courses, and research on the future workforce and workplace.

Future Workplace Academy™ is a curated collection of five-week online courses to upskill HR and HRIS team members for the future of work. Future Workplace Academy is designed by and for HR and HRIS team members with all online courses guided by an advisory board led by Future Workplace®. Currently, Future Workplace online courses are eligible for 8 SHRM and HRCI re-certification credits as well as a digital badge shareable on all social media channels.

These online courses target HR and HRIS team members to develop new skills to thrive in the future workplace.

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